

BY JOANNA MACY

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ACTIVE HOPE

How to Face
the Mess We're in
without Going Crazy

JOANNA MACY &
CHRIS JOHNSTONE



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continue is larger than we are, and when our actions are guided by this desire, we can imagine around us the cheering of all those sharing our aims: the ancestors, the future beings, the natural world itself. When we're feeling alone, discouraged, or desperate, we can turn to any of these for support.

If we're not accustomed to seeking solace from the natural world, a good place to start is by casting our mind back to our fondest memories of times spent in nature. Were there any special places where we felt especially at peace or that we particularly loved to visit? Drawing on our memories and imagination, we can mentally return to these places and recall the feeling of receiving from nature; in reliving this experience, we receive again. Even better is to find a special place in nature where we can go and make contact. We can think of this as similar to visiting an old friend or mentor. But can a place really speak to us? Try the following exercise and see what happens.

TRY THIS:

FINDING A LISTENING POST IN NATURE

Is there a place where you feel more connected to the web of life? It can be either somewhere you go physically or somewhere in your imagination. Each time you go there, make yourself comfortable. Think of yourself plugging in to a root system that can draw up insights and inspiration as well as other nutrients. To receive guidance, all you need to do is ask for it, and then listen.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maintaining Energy and Enthusiasm

When we catch the spark of heartfelt activism for our world, that inner fire can be a remarkable source of energy. However, it also brings with it the risk of burnout. How can we remain fired up for any length of time without being driven to exhaustion? In this chapter we look at how to keep inspiration fresh by making what we do more enjoyable and by keeping personal sustainability right at the heart of what we do.

With our world in crisis, it might seem a bit indulgent to be considering our own enjoyment. With so many pressing issues to address, shouldn't we brush aside concerns about personal gratification? Yet there is a strategic value to making what we do rewarding, and it goes further than just preventing burnout. Although many millions of people are already involved in the Great Turning, the movement needs to grow, and the attractiveness of participation grows when it is recognized as a path to deepened aliveness and a more satisfying way of life. Here are five strategies that help,

- Recognize enthusiasm as a valuable renewable resource.
- Broaden our definition of activism.
- Follow the inner compass of our deep gladness.
- Redefine what it means to have a good life.
- See success with new eyes and savor it.

RECOGNIZE ENTHUSIASM AS A
VALUABLE RENEWABLE RESOURCE

Each year, erosion from unsustainable agriculture robs our world of as much farmland as could cover the whole of Kentucky. Similarly, when we push ourselves too hard or are worn down by chronic exposure to harsh conditions, our enthusiasm, like topsoil, can begin to erode.

In responding to the problems of our world, we do need to stretch ourselves and face adversities. The problem is that stretching too far and for too long brings with it the risk of burnout. This state of physical and emotional exhaustion is a form of overshoot and collapse; it is caused by long-term exposure to high levels of stress along with insufficient time and nourishment for renewal. Jenny, who'd worked for many years in a campaigning organization, described what it felt like:

I used to love the work I did. I used to enjoy giving talks and engaging with people. But I reached the point where I felt sick of everything. I had worked too hard for too long, and I didn't have anything left to give.

When athletes want to improve their performance, they expect to push beyond their comfort zones. Through the well-established principle of interval training, they alternate periods of increased effort with pauses for renewal. A similar principle applies in yoga when a stretch extends briefly beyond what is comfortable and then draws back. When we keep pushing we risk harming ourselves. To develop forms of activism we can sustain for decades, we need to address our requirements for renewal. If we are to create an approach to activism that we will want to stick with over a lifetime and that others are drawn to as well, then we need to look at what feeds our enthusiasm too.

Sustainable agriculture reveals how valuable a resource healthy soil is. Finding ways to nourish, renew, and restore soil is a key to long-term productivity. It is similar with our enthusiasm: if we see it as valuable, then we become more interested in how we can nourish, renew, and restore this precious resource.

An image of a boat floating on water provides a starting point for mapping out the factors influencing our ability and willingness to keep going (see Fig. 12). The water level represents our inner reserves of energy and enthusiasm, while hitting a problem like burnout is like crashing into a rock. Draining factors are shown as downward arrows that lower the water level and increase our likelihood of hitting rocks. Nourishing factors that replenish and strengthen us are mapped as arrows pushing the water level up. For example, when we feel we're making progress with our projects, our morale is boosted, raising the water level. Each time we feel discouraged, whether by setbacks, arguments, or the experience of powerlessness, the water level drops. So to strengthen our resilience, we need to pay attention to all the factors that sustain us.

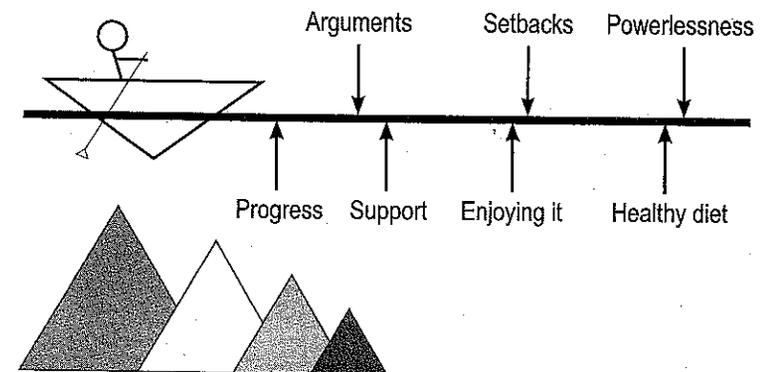


Figure 12. Mapping factors influencing our energy and enthusiasm

If we experience too much discouragement and too few “upward arrows,” then we are in danger of reaching such a low ebb that we may wonder what the point is and think about giving up. When we lose the will, energy, and enthusiasm to continue, we’re hitting the rock of burnout.

With the worsening condition of our world, the slow pace of progress, and the enormous resistance to tackling issues, protecting our enthusiasm has become especially important. Building support around us, as discussed in the previous chapter, plays a central role here, but it is only one of many potential “upward arrows.” Once we recognize the value of enthusiasm, we start searching for ways to make what we do more satisfying. The following open sentences invite this exploration.

TRY THIS: OPEN SENTENCES ON
MAINTAINING ENERGY AND ENTHUSIASM

These open sentences can be used when journaling, in conversation with friends, or within a group. They work well in conjunction with the water level mapping process.

- Things that drain, demoralize, or exhaust me include...
- What nourishes and energizes me is...
- The times I’m most enthusiastic are when...

What might happen if we applied open sentences like these when planning meetings or events? Many public meetings follow the old model of having an active speaker at the front of the room and a passive audience sitting in rows, with little, if any, interaction. Sometimes these meetings can be informative and inspiring; they can also be boring and can induce passivity. The water level

diagram can be used to map out factors that make the difference. How can we push up the water level of enthusiasm in meetings so that people look forward to coming rather than just showing up out of duty?

A sustainability group in Frome, England, had a meeting every month, often with a speaker or a film followed by a discussion. Their meetings became much more popular when they started the evening by sitting down together and eating food they’d brought to share. By having time and opportunity to talk with each other, they fed the friendships and sense of community that made them look forward to coming. Conversations while eating have led to a sprouting of collaborative projects and activities that have transformed the local community.

BROADEN OUR DEFINITION OF ACTIVISM

What is the opposite of an activist? Is it someone who is passive? If so, it seems strange that the term *activist* should be reserved for just a few of us rather than being an identity we all take pride in or aspire to. The practice of Active Hope involves being an activist for what we hope for in the world. We’re using the term *activist* here to mean anyone who is active for a purpose bigger than personal gain.

The three dimensions of the Great Turning offer a structure that extends the range of activism beyond the important work of campaigning and protest. Whenever we act from *bodhichitta*, the desire that all life be well, we are being an activist. This includes all endeavors to build a sustainable culture, along with everything that promotes the shift in consciousness and perception supporting this. Having a larger map of activism encourages us to move more freely between these different dimensions, as well as to combine them in ways that empower us. It is possible to overextend ourselves in any of these dimensions, and it can be refreshing to switch track, to move from one area to another, when we are getting worn down.

"Our activism is through our publishing," say Tim and Maddy Harland, who for more than twenty years have produced *Permaculture* magazine. "Our activism is through growing things," say Manu Song and Edi Hamilton, founders of a community agriculture project. Taking part in the Great Turning doesn't have to mean suddenly changing jobs or giving up our other interests. Rather, it means applying our skills, experience, networks, enthusiasm, and temperament to the healing of our world. A participant in an online discussion organized by Transition U.S. said:

The three types of action to achieve the Great Turning is a very helpful structure. . . . I am by nature better geared to one kind of this work than another and it is okay to apply myself where I work best.

FOLLOW THE INNER COMPASS OF OUR DEEP GLADNESS

While there may be periods when we feel ground down or discouraged, there are also times when activism is hugely satisfying, stimulating, and enjoyable. By becoming interested in what makes this so, we can identify what we want to focus on. The flip side of this is that when we feel ourselves going sour inside, experiencing resentment and a loss of our spark, it is worth pausing and reflecting on the choices we can make to restore our enthusiasm. Our degree of enthusiasm can act as a guide, like an inner compass, that helps us steer toward the sort of activity we'll want to stick with in the long term.

We are more effective when acting from our strengths and enthusiasm. That is where the Great Turning can happen through us most powerfully. This is a big shift away from the idea that there is one right way forward that we should all follow. Rather, it suggests that each of us needs to find our place of greatest fit. Author and minister Frederick Buechner describes this as where "our deep

gladness and the world's deep need meet."¹ When we find this convergence, the Great Turning works through us in a way uniquely ours.

REDEFINE WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE A GOOD LIFE

The view of a satisfying life presented by glossy magazines and advertisements involves luxury and leisure, illustrated by images of people sunbathing by swimming pools and being served martinis. The scientific research on happiness shows this to be a long way from what really makes life satisfying. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his classic book *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*, writes:

The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.²

Luxury doesn't challenge and stretch us in a way that leads to satisfaction. But activism does in a number of ways. First, when we act in alignment with our deepest values, we experience an inner sense of rightness behind what we do. Second, when we apply ourselves to facing a challenge in a way that absorbs our attention, we are more likely to go into the flow states that psychologists like Csikszentmihalyi have linked so strongly to life satisfaction.

To go into this kind of flow state, we want to face a challenge difficult enough to absorb us but not so difficult that we feel defeated. When we use our strengths and enthusiasms, we're more likely to enter the nourishing state of absorption where we lose all track of time. This creates a self-reinforcing spiral, where the more we act from our strengths the more we go into flow, and the more we become absorbed by an activity, the better we get at it. We gain

even more satisfaction when “virtuous cycles” like this contribute to our world.

If we believe the research findings rather than the advertising industry, activism offers a more reliable path to a satisfying life than consumerism. Unfortunately, for both our world and our collective mood, this is not yet the dominant view. However, an international movement committed to redefining what it means to have a good life is growing.³ In England, Chris set up the Bristol Happiness Lectures, a series of annual talks that have attracted hundreds of people each year and been watched by many more on YouTube.⁴ One year the theme was “happiness and sustainability.” The title of Chris’s talk was “How Facing Bad News about the World Can Make You Happier.”

At first sight, people may scratch their heads at this title and ask, “Are you serious?” The conventional view is that awareness of world problems is a threat to happiness and, as a result, it is resisted. At issue here are two different understandings of what good mood is based on; one aims for a happy picture, and the other engages in a satisfying process.

The happy-picture approach works along the lines of “If only I had _____ then I’d be happy,” happiness here being linked to having the right things. The usual list of desired items includes money, success, and good looks, plus whatever consumer items are most in fashion at the time. If we don’t have the right things or look the right way, then our life is not a “happy picture.” It is easy to feel deficient when measuring ourselves against this manufactured stereotype; our resultant dissatisfaction is a strong driver of consumerism.

One thing you don’t find in a happy picture is bad news. Keeping the picture smiley and upbeat involves resisting sources of gloom, so unwelcome features of reality get airbrushed out of view and screened out of conversation. This approach leaves us completely unprepared when we finally get it that we are facing a crisis.

A satisfying process is more like a good story that has both ups

and downs. There is no need to hide from bad news here; indeed, it may be the very thing that provokes us to act in a way that makes our life more satisfying. When we rise to a challenge, our strengths are activated and our sense of purpose switched on. There is no guarantee we will succeed in bringing about the changes we hope for, but the process of giving our full attention and effort draws out our aliveness. This is what Active Hope is all about; when we live this way, the boredom and emptiness so prevalent in modern society simply disappear.

Someone whose story illustrates the contrast between these two approaches to the good life is John Robbins. At the age of twenty, his life was the American dream come true. His father and uncle had set up the largest ice-cream business in history, and John was being groomed to become the next CEO. Something in this happy picture didn’t feel right, though. The company’s advertising slogan, “we make people happy,” didn’t ring true to John. While ice cream and smiles might seem to go together, the consequence of reinforcing this pairing is an increase in obesity and heart disease. What was good for making money wasn’t good for people’s health. In his book *The New Good Life*, John describes his dilemma:

An ice cream cone never killed anyone, but the more ice cream people eat the more likely they are to develop health problems, and the company naturally wanted to sell as much ice cream as possible.

John felt not only that this obsession with money was wrong, but also that it took people away from the things that make life most worthwhile. Describing the pull of a path he found more attractive, he wrote:

I felt called to a different way of life, one whose purpose wasn’t focused on making the most money but on making the

most difference. . . . If I were to refuse that call, I might end up rich, but I would surely end up untrue to myself and unhappy. To live against our innermost values can make us sick. It also can lead to disingenuous, counterfeit, or artificial lives.⁷

A truly satisfying process is one we have our heart in; for John, life as a multimillionaire executive didn't offer this. At the age of twenty-one, he turned his back on the vast financial wealth that could have been his. He washed dishes and did other part-time work to support himself through college. In 1969 he and his wife, Deo, went to live in a tiny one-room log cabin they built on an island in Canada. For the next ten years, they lived a simple life, growing much of their own food and thriving on less than a thousand dollars between them each year. Describing the contrast to the world of money he had grown up in, he wrote:

Both Deo and I wanted to know if something else was possible and might even be more fulfilling. . . . something in our bones told us that humanity was on a collision course with tragedy, and we felt compelled to step out of the rat race so we could more authentically step into our lives.⁶

Some years later, John went on to write the million-copy best-seller *Diet for a New America*, in which he explores the links between food, health, and our environment.⁷ The income from book sales didn't deflect John and Deo from their simple life; they'd discovered something on that Canadian island that was both profoundly fulfilling and deeply important to them. It is a game any of us can play, and it has the potential to enrich our lives and transform our world. Here's how John describes it:

The object of the game is to see how much you can lower your spending while raising your quality of life.⁸

If everyone lived as the average North American or European does, we'd need three to five planets like Earth to supply the resources and cope with the rubbish.⁹ Because the link between happiness and consumerism has been so powerfully woven into our culture, the idea of "giving up" or "cutting back" is usually seen as grim and threatening. Yet, as John points out, the real losses come from consumerism. Bit by bit, we are losing our world. We are losing the forests, the fish, the bees; we are wiping out whole species. We are losing the richness of community and much of what makes life meaningful. We are now on the brink of losing the biological support systems we need to survive.

Through the game of learning to live well with less, we stand to gain. We stand to increase our resilience at a time of financial uncertainty, reducing the anxiety over how we'll manage when money is short or loses its value. This game played well leads to happier, more fulfilling lives.

SEE SUCCESS WITH NEW EYES

While having our heart in what we do is an essential part of what makes life satisfying, it isn't enough. Repeated failure, frustration, and lack of progress can leave us wondering whether we're wasting our time. It is difficult to stick to a path if we don't see it going anywhere. So the way we understand and experience success affects our willingness to keep going.

The models of success we're likely to have been given generally take us in the wrong direction. In the story of Business as Usual, success is measured in terms of wealth, fame, or position. A company making massive profits is regarded as successful, even when its ways of doing this harm its employees and our world. People are judged as successful simply because they have managed to acquire a vastly larger share of the world's resources than they could ever need — at a time when hundreds of millions starve. It is the very

hunger for this type of success that leads us, collectively, to plunder our planet.

With the consciousness shift of the Great Turning, we recognize ourselves as intimately connected with all life, like a cell within a larger body. To call an individual cell "successful" while the larger body sickens or dies is complete nonsense. If we are to survive as a civilization, we need the intelligence to define success as that which contributes to the well-being of our larger body, the web of life. Commercial success is easy to count, but how do we count the success of contributing to planetary well-being? Do we experience this success often? And if not, what is getting in the way?

TRY THIS: REFLECTING ON SUCCESS

Taking your definition of success as that which contributes to the well-being of our world, how often do you feel you are succeeding?

We experience success when we reach a goal that is significant to us. But what if our goal is the elimination of poverty or the transition to a low-carbon economy? If the change we want doesn't happen in our lifetime, does that mean we will never experience success? For the encouraging boost we get when we know we're moving forward, we need to find markers of progress we can spot more easily and often. What helps here is making the distinction between eventual goals and intermediate ones.

The progressive brainstorming process described in chapter 9 began with longer-range, eventual goals. These are the things we would really like to see happen, even if we can't immediately see how they will come about. We take one of these eventual goals and list some of the conditions needed to bring it about. So if our

creating the conditions for peace!

goal is the elimination of poverty, we would need to have in place widespread political will, new taxation policies, redistribution of resources, and the like. Then, taking one of these, we ask, "What would be needed for this?" Each stage moves us closer to our present situation. Before long, we're identifying steps that are within our reach, such as eating lower in the food chain or setting up a study-action group on world hunger.

For any goal we choose to pursue, we track back in time to identify intermediate steps. Each time we take a step like this, we are succeeding. Instead of rushing on immediately to the next task, we can take a moment to savor these mini-victories. The following open sentence is a useful prompt for this process.

TRY THIS: SAVORING SUCCESS EVERY DAY

A recent step I've taken that I feel good about is...

There are steps we take that often don't get counted, like the choice of where to place our attention. Just noticing that things are seriously amiss is a step on the journey. If we care enough to want to do something, that is also a significant mini-victory. Just to show up with bodhichitta is a success.

In a society that views success in competitive terms, it is usually only those recognized as "winners" who are applauded. We need to learn the skill of encouraging and applauding ourselves. We can reinforce our appreciation of the steps we take by imagining the support of the ancestors, the future beings, and the more-than-human world. When we develop our receptivity, we will sense them cheering us on. If we form a study-action group or build support in other ways, we can take time to do this for each other, noticing and appreciating what we're doing well.

When we reflect on past successes, we can ask, "What strengths in me helped me do that?" Naming our strengths makes them more available to us. However, the challenges we face demand of us more commitment, endurance, and courage than we could ever dredge up out of our individual supply. That is why we need to make the essential shift of seeing with new eyes — it takes the process of strength recognition to a new level, that of the larger web of life. Just as we can identify with the suffering of other beings in this web, so too can we identify with their successes and draw on their strengths. There is an ancient Buddhist meditation that helps us do this. It is called "the Great Ball of Merit" and it is excellent training for the moral imagination:

TRY THIS: THE GREAT BALL OF MERIT

Relax and close your eyes, relax into your breathing... Open your awareness to the fellow beings who share with you this planet-time... in this room... this neighborhood... this town. Open to all those in this country and in other lands... Let your awareness encompass all beings living now in our world.

Opening now to all time, let your awareness encompass all beings who have ever lived... of all races and creeds and walks of life, rich and poor, kings and beggars, saints and sinners... Like successive mountain ranges, the vast vistas of these fellow beings present themselves to your mind's eye.

Now open to the knowledge that in each of these innumerable lives some act of merit was performed. No matter how stunted or deprived the life, there was at the very least one gesture of kindness, one gift of love, or one act

of valor or self-sacrifice... on the battlefield or in the workplace, hospital or home... From each of these beings in their endless multitudes arose actions of courage, kindness, of teaching and healing... Let yourself see these manifold, immeasurable acts of merit.

Now imagine that you can sweep together these acts of merit. Sweep them into a pile in front of you. Use your hands... pile them up... pile them into a heap, viewing it with gladness and gratitude. Now pat them into a ball. It is the Great Ball of Merit. Hold it now and weigh it in your hands... Rejoice in it, knowing that no act of goodness is ever lost. It remains ever and always a present resource... a means for the transformation of life... So now, with jubilation and thanksgiving, you turn that great ball, turn it over... over... into the healing of our world.

The more we practice this meditation, the more familiar we become with the process of drawing strengths from outside our narrow self. Knowing about the Great Ball of Merit can also change the way we think about our own actions. Each time we do something, no matter how small, that is guided by bodhichitta and contributes to our world, we know we are adding to this abundance.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Strengthened by Uncertainty

In his study of environmental factors threatening the viability of our civilization, Jared Diamond identifies a dozen issues that are “like time bombs.”¹ Any of these, including climate change, peak oil, water scarcity, overpopulation, habitat destruction, loss of topsoil, and rising toxin levels, could trigger the collapse of our society. In combination, their impact is even more devastating. As these perils worsen, along with ever-increasing wars and the continued production of weapons of mass destruction, the Great Unraveling becomes more difficult to ignore. Many of us are left feeling so uncertain about the future that we wonder whether we will make it.

In the story of Business as Usual, alarm and dread over these conditions are far from welcome. To address all these issues, we would have to change our way of living, our systems of accounting, our pattern of energy consumption, our modes of transport, and the entire basis of our industrial-growth economy. Can we justify the costs and upheaval of all this if we can’t prove beyond a doubt that these measures are necessary and absolutely sure to solve our problems? When we’re attached to the old way of doing things, uncertainty is used to support the “Big No” to any suggestion that we need to change our way of life.

The Great Turning begins with a different view. When we face the mess we are in, we know the future is uncertain. That is an unavoidable feature of our times. But what we do with this uncertainty

is a matter of choice. In this chapter, we explore how our very not knowing can enliven us; by making friends with uncertainty, we can become strengthened by the gifts it has to offer.

HOW WE LOOK AT UNCERTAINTY

If we take action only when we are reasonably sure of success, uncertainty can be paralyzing. In tackling climate change, for example, we can't be sure we haven't already passed a tipping point that sets us on track for a doomsday scenario. The sense that our world might be coming to an end is already leading many people to give up, to become cynical and drained of purpose. After all, what is the point of making an effort to improve things if we believe catastrophe is inevitable? If we are not to be blocked by the part of us that wonders whether we're already too late, we need a different way of relating to the challenging uncertainties of our time.

In Chris's addiction work, every year some clients he knew well died from their alcohol and drug use, while others grew stronger in their recovery. When he saw new clients, he never knew which way they would go. It was a good sign when they felt this same uncertainty too. If they were certain things would go well, there was a danger of complacency. On the other hand, if they saw themselves as hopeless cases, their belief that a downward spiral was inevitable led them to give up, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thank goodness for uncertainty. When we know the future isn't yet decided, there is room for us to play a role in influencing what happens.

When we fall in love or start out in a career, can we be certain it will work out well? When contractions herald the birth of new life, is a safe delivery, or even the baby's survival, guaranteed? Life, in its richness and mystery, never offers guarantees of success. We don't let that stop us. Indeed, our awareness that the outcome is uncertain is what prompts us to prepare; it calls us to attention. Neither complacent optimism nor resigned pessimism has power to

motivate us; they don't generate a hunger for learning or provoke our best response.

UNCERTAINTY ADDS MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE

What is it that keeps people's eyes glued to the ball when watching a sport? What impels us to turn the page when reading a novel? It is our not knowing what's going to happen yet our wanting to. If we already knew what was going to happen next, what would keep us from falling asleep? Our lives get boring when they are too predictable. We can feel like we are just going through the motions. But notice the times when our heart quickens, when we snap awake with our full attention aroused. When do those moments occur? Here is one from Chris's life:

After nearly ten years of medical training, I'd recently resigned and was now out of a job. It felt like a life-or-death decision, since just a few months before, when recovering from a working week of 112 hours, I'd fallen asleep while driving and had totaled my car. I could easily have been killed, or have killed someone else. And now I didn't know what I was going to do, where I was going to live, or how I was going to support myself. I just knew, deep in my bones, that I had to get out.

My legs were wobbly with fear, my knees like jelly. I had gone to sit in the hills of Wales, to have contact with nature and to ask for help. As I sat there, watching the clouds and the grass and the insects, I burst out laughing. I'd been hit by a moment of clarity, and it seemed funny. My problem and my fear was that I didn't know what was going to happen. Yet it was this very not knowing that made for mystery in life. I didn't know what lay around the corner in time; opening to the mystery and adventure of this left me feeling not fear but excitement.

If we have spent decades building a life in Business as Usual and our sense of security is linked to this, then moving into the uncharted territory of a different story is likely to bring up fear. Being too attached to familiarity can make uncertainty feel as scary as the outside world is for an agoraphobic. That is why it is so easy to get stuck in what's familiar, even when we know this isn't good for us or for our world.

Since stepping into new ground involves frequent encounters with not knowing, we need to make friends with this feeling. It will be a companion on our journey.

UNCERTAINTY BRINGS US INTO THE PRESENT

The elegant poise of a martial artist embodies a state of readiness. At any moment an attack may come, a block may be needed, a swift move required. Who will strike? Where and when? Not knowing brings your attention fully into the present. Being anywhere else means you end up on the floor. Times of crisis have a similar effect: they wake us up and engage our full attention.

Bringing ourselves into the present moment doesn't mean we lose connection with the past or future. We are shaped by our history; it is part of who we are. What we add is intentionality. This choice-making is our bridge to the future, as each intention represents a preference for the kind of world we want. Our intentionality endows the present moment with direction.

When Joanna was in Tibet, she received an important teaching about the power of intention from watching the monks rebuild the monastery of Khampagar. Once a major center of Tibetan Buddhist culture and learning, it had been destroyed by the Red Guards during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. A shift to a more relaxed occupation policy had allowed reconstruction to begin. This policy, however, could be reversed at any moment; there was no guarantee that the monastery, once rebuilt, would not be destroyed again.

That didn't stop the monks. They faced the uncertainty by bringing to it their intention. They assumed that since you cannot know, you simply proceed. You do what you have to do. You put one stone on top of another and another on top of that. If the stones are knocked down, you begin again, because if you don't, nothing will be built. You persist. In the long run, it is persistence that shapes the future.

BODHICHITTA

With the uncertainties we face, we need a strength of intention similar to that of those Tibetan monks. If we take bodhichitta — the desire for the welfare of all beings — as our foundation stone, then that is what we can count on, whatever else is happening. Bodhichitta is grounded in our conscious connectedness with all life. So this is our starting point. It is what we build on. Moving around the spiral of the Work That Reconnects helps us strengthen this connectedness, helps us open to and trust it more. Each time we go around the spiral, we reinforce our bodhichitta. In a time of uncertainty, it can be the one thing we are sure of.

In the Buddhist tradition, bodhichitta is seen as something very precious, something to treasure and protect. We can think of it as a flame in our hearts and minds that guides us and shines through our actions. The bodhisattvas, the hero figures of the Buddhist tradition, have such strong bodhichitta that even when they reach the gates of nirvana, having earned the right to disappear into eternal bliss, they turn around every time and choose to come back. They choose to return to samsara, this realm of suffering, because their bodhichitta calls them to serve life on Earth and act for the welfare of all beings.

We can play with this image of the bodhisattva choosing to return to our world and use it as the starting point for a thought experiment. Trying out a different way of thinking about our situation is a powerful way of strengthening our resilience and creativity. The

bodhisattva archetype is present in all religions and even all social movements. Whenever you act for the sake of life on Earth, you express the courageous compassion within you that we can think of as your bodhisattva self. This is part of who you are. You don't have to be a Buddhist or believe in reincarnation to benefit from the exercise described below. We invite you to try it and see where it takes you.

TRY THIS: THE BODHISATTVA PERSPECTIVE

The starting point for this process is to imagine yourself poised at the gateway into your present life. You are back before your birth into this lifetime of yours. For this incarnation, you will have an opportunity to take part in the great changes arising with the dawn of the third millennium; after many decades of growing danger, human civilization is bringing the world to a point of unparalleled peril and promise.

The challenges take many forms — the making and using of nuclear weapons, industrial technologies that poison and lay waste to whole ecosystems, billions of people sinking into poverty — but one thing is clear. A quantum leap in consciousness is required if life is to prevail on Earth. Hearing this, you decide to renew your commitment to life and reenter the fray by taking birth as a human living on Earth at this time, bringing with you everything you've ever learned about courage and community. This is a major decision. And it is a hard decision because there is no guarantee that you will remember why you came back and no assurance that you will succeed in your mission. Furthermore, you may well feel alone, because you probably won't

even recognize the many other bodhisattvas who, like you, have chosen to be born into this time.

Take a moment to reflect on your willingness to take a human birth in so challenging a planet-time. It is your bodhichitta that calls you. Yet this is such a harsh time, and you are aware that you may be born into a life much touched by suffering.

Every human life is by necessity a particular life. You can't take birth as a generic human, but only as a unique human shaped by particular circumstances. So feel yourself stepping into these circumstances now. Imagine that you choose them in awareness of how they will help prepare you to serve the flourishing of life.

Step into the year of your birth. The timing of your birth allows you to be affected by particular conditions and events....

Step into the place of your birth. What country did you choose? Were you born in a town or a city, or on the land? Which parts of the Earth's body first greeted your eyes?

Which skin color and ethnicity did you select? And what socioeconomic conditions? Both the privileges and the privations resulting from these choices help prepare you for the work you are coming to do....

Into what faith tradition — or lack thereof — were you born this time? Religious stories and images from childhood — or the very lack of these — influence how you see and search for your purpose....

Now here's an important choice: which gender did you adopt this time around? And which sexual preference?...

And as to your parents: what man did you choose to be your father? What woman your mother? This might mean

your adoptive parents as well as your birth parents. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of your parents, both the loving care you received and the hurts you experienced, help prepare you for the work you are coming to do....

Are you an only child, or do you have siblings in this life? The companionship, the competition, or the loneliness that ensued from that choice will foster the unique blend of strengths you bring to your world....

What disabilities did you choose to take on this time? Challenges of body or mind can deepen your understanding of the difficulties and capacities of others.

Certain strengths and passions characterize this life of yours too. Which mental, physical, and spiritual powers and appetites did you choose for yourself in this planet-time?...

And last, imagining that you can for a moment see it clearly, what particular mission are you coming to perform?...

Each choice relates to your actual life and not to any fantasized alternative to it. What you're doing is seeing these choices from a more encompassing dimension of consciousness. It is as though you're remembering an important part of your identity that may have been hidden from view. With this process, you're becoming reacquainted with the bodhisattva within you. You can do this process as a personal reflection, writing in a journal or as a letter to yourself. If you are doing it with a friend or in a small group, you can take turns checking in with each other, describing your experience of this process and any insights, thoughts, or feelings it evokes.

As you become familiar with this exercise, you may wish to add or subtract topics for the bodhisattvas' report. A follow-up session can reflect on choices we made in the course of this lifetime, relating, for example, to educational endeavors, spiritual practices, central relationships, and vocational explorations and commitments. After participating in this process, a colleague wrote:

I have been thinking a lot about the Bodhisattva's Choices. I found it very empowering. I consider myself an accountable person. Yet I'd never before systematically reviewed all the major circumstances in my life and celebrated them for bringing me to this time and place.

We are aware that the idea of our choosing our life conditions may be problematic for some people. The idea of taking responsibility for situations that have oppressed us can smack of blaming the victim. Our purpose, however, is to recognize that all life's experiences, even the harsh and limiting ones, can be seen as ennobling and enriching to our understanding and motivations to serve. Spiritual traditions affirm that true liberation arises when we can embrace the particulars of our lives and see that they are as right for us as if we had indeed chosen them.

FINDING THE PEARL OF ACTIVE HOPE

When Boris Cyrulnik was ten years old, he had to go into hiding. Living in France during the German occupation, he needed to stay invisible to survive. Because of their Jewish descent, other members of his family were taken to Auschwitz and killed. Boris's experience of extreme hardship left him with questions about what helps us find strength, what deepens our resilience. Working with abused children, child soldiers in Colombia, and survivors of genocide in

Rwanda, he became one of the world's leading psychologists addressing children's recovery from trauma. In his book *Resilience*, he writes:

The pearl inside the oyster might be the emblem of resilience. When a grain of sand gets into an oyster and is so irritating that, in order to defend itself, the oyster has to secrete a nacreous substance, the defensive reaction produces a material that is hard, shiny and precious.²

We live at a time when the living body of our Earth is under attack and when the attacker is not an alien force but our own industrial-growth society. At the same time, an extraordinary recovery process is under way, a vital creative response we call the Great Turning. What helps us face the mess we're in is the knowledge that each of us has something significant to offer, a contribution to make. In rising to the challenge of playing our best role, we discover something precious that both enriches our lives and adds to the healing of our world. An oyster, in response to trauma, grows a pearl. We grow, and offer, our gift of Active Hope.

Notes

All websites accessed August/September 2011.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 3.

INTRODUCTION

1. In a 2002 global poll of 25,164 people from 175 countries, 67 percent thought global environmental conditions are getting worse. See <http://netpulseglobalpoll.politicsonline.com/results/highlights.doc>.
2. Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and colleague Linda Bilmes calculated that the United States has spent more than \$3 trillion on the war in Iraq. See *The Three Trillion Dollar War* (New York: Norton, 2008).
3. See Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1998).
4. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009), 10.
5. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (Brookline, MA: International Pocket Library, 1912), 45.

CHAPTER ONE. THREE STORIES OF OUR TIME

1. David Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2006), 251.